

When Rage Runs into Faith

5th Sun. of Easter – 05/03/26 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Acts 6:1-9; 7:2a, 51-60 Pastor Keith Besel

vv. 54-55, [Literal translation from the Greek,] **“And hearing these things, [the Jews] were being sawn in half within their hearts and they ground their teeth against [Stephen]. But being full of the Holy Spirit, He gazed earnestly into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right of God.”**

Introduction

✘ Christ is risen. *He is risen indeed. Alleluia!*

✘ In this text, we are now, somewhere within the first 2 or 3 years after this glorious victory that we proclaim and celebrate so boldly in the Easter season. And yet the massive impact of Jesus' resurrection upon both the believers of the new Christian Church and the Jews and their rulers is still clearly palpable.

→ Our reading today consists of the beginning nine verses of chapter six and the last ten verses of chapter seven in the book of Acts. But there are 56 verses in between these two bookends that fill in the story of Stephen; the first Christian believer to be killed because of his relentless faith in Jesus.

I. God blesses and grows the early Church

✘ Last Sunday we heard about these brand new Christians immediately after Jesus' resurrection and how they “persisted” in their connection to the Apostles' teaching; to the fellowship of believers and to Christ's gifts in Word, Sacrament and Worship so that “the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47).

→ Now, perhaps 2-3 years later; still in Jerusalem, verse one of our text today says that “the disciples” (i.e. the followers of Christ) were (still) increasing in number.”

→ In fact, it has been conservatively estimated that at the time of this text the total number of Christians was somewhere between 20-25 thousand souls. Yet we see in verse two that Jesus' 12 disciples still seem to be the primary leaders, not only of the spiritual teaching and care, but also overseeing what verse one calls the “daily distribution” or literally in the Greek, “the ministration/service” of physically caring for those who were needy and unable to provide for themselves. So, by my simple math, that comes out to something like one apostle for every 1600 or more souls. Trust me – that is more than any human pastor can possibly care for.

→ That's why a problem arose, where one group in the Church, the Hellenists – that is the Jews who had accepted the Greek language and culture, believed that the Hebrews – those who were still holding onto their Jewish language and culture even as Christians, were neglecting the Hellenist widows when it came to the charitable allotment of food and other necessities.

✘ And so, God granted wisdom to the apostles to find Spirit-filled and wise men to take over these administrative duties so that the Apostles' would not have to neglect their role as the Spiritual leaders in Christ's Church.

→ It's similar to the way that our churches elect Church Council and board members to lead many of the administrative roles of ministry so that the pastor is able to keep his focus on the preaching, teaching, and spiritual care of the members.

✘ We see in verse seven how God blessed this arrangement so that “the word of God continued to increase, and the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem.” It even says that “a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.” That's huge, because that would include

Pharisees, Sadducees, Scribes and Rabbis who now believed that Jesus is the promised Messiah and the only Savior of souls.

II. Stephen's Christian Faith Refutes False Accusations

✘ Unfortunately though, there were still a large majority of these Jewish leaders, from within a number of Jewish groups who remained strong adversaries of those who now confessed and believed in Jesus.

→ And the middle portions of chapters 6-7 describe, in great detail, how deeply set these people still were in their Jewish convictions.

✘ One of those men selected to help the apostles' – apparently along with his administrative duties, was “doing great wonders and signs among the people” (v.8). He was Stephen, a man whom God had especially gifted to be “full of grace and power” from the Holy Spirit.

→ According to verses 10-15 in chapter six, these Jewish leaders “could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which (Stephen) was speaking” (6:10) and so they seized Stephen and secretly instigated men to make three false accusations against Stephen. They said, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against 1) Moses and 2) God” (6:11). And 3rd, they said, “This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place (i.e. the Temple) and the law” (6:13).

✘ And what takes place next provides you and me, right now today, with a great example of what happens when the intense rage of sinful men runs into the equally intense faith of one who has been cleansed and forgiven by the blood of Jesus.

→ Instead of allowing his sinful pride or fear or defensiveness to boil up in a rage-filled response to these blatantly false accusations, chapter 6:15 says that “gazing at [Stephen], all who sat in the (Jewish) Council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.” I honestly can't pretend to know exactly what that is describing there, but I would say that he was so clearly filled with the Holy Spirit that he exuded great calm, confidence and peace in front of these raging adversaries. And I can only imagine how much Stephen's lack of aggression worked to stoke the coals of their rage even more, just as it happened when Jesus stood silent before the Jewish High Priest and Council when their blood was boiling and seeking to crucify Him.

✘ The next 50 verses of chapter seven tell us how Stephen calmly and systematically confessed his sincere faith in all that the Old Testament Scripture had revealed to God's people at that time.

→ He proves that he has not blasphemed against God, but holds firmly to the long held truth of God's work in and through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as well as Joseph's role as God's servant in Egypt to save God's people from the famine in Egypt. In all of this, Stephen shows, the crucial connection to the Covenant God made with Abraham that his offspring would one day worship God in The Promised Land.

→ Stephen continued then to show that he has not blasphemed against Moses, but that he confesses the truth of God's work through Moses in confronting Pharaoh. And he especially points out how Moses even prophesied about the coming Messiah, saying in chapter 7:37-38, “This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, ‘God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers.’ This is the One who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to [Moses] at Mount Sinai, and with our fathers.”

→ But then in 7:39, Stephen doesn't shy away from sharing God's own true accusations against the ancestors of these raging Jews. He said, “Our fathers refused to obey [Moses], but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt...” and their false idols and gods.

→ Finally, Stephen then clearly refutes the accusation that he had spoken against God's Temple by recounting the history of the Tabernacle and Temple as the physical place where God promised to be with His people here on earth. Yet he quotes Isaiah 66 where Yahweh says, "Heaven is My home and the earth is my footstool...Did not My hand make all these things? (7:49-50).

✘ All of this, Stephen confidently confessed before these raging Jews. Why? To try and bring them to repentance; to try and lead them to see that Jesus is not against God and His Word, but instead is the ultimate fulfillment of all of it!

→ That's when today's text picks up in Acts 7:51 and Stephen brings home the ultimate application of his words to these seething men in front of him. He says, "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you." And what is it that Stephen says their fathers did?

→ Well, they did to all of God's prophets in the Old Testament; to John the Baptizer; and to Jesus just what they are wanting to do to Stephen right now. Persecute, reject, resist, falsely accuse and murder them! The greatest of their sins, of course, was what had happened most recently when they refused to see Jesus as the "Righteous One"; as the Messiah promised by all of the prophets and sent by God to redeem and save all of mankind from our sin and disobedience.

III. Unyielding Unbelief Rages Against the Truth

✘ So what happens when Stephen's kind of calm and confident confession of the truth runs up against that boiling rage of unbelief that refuses to consider even God's perfect truth?

→ Just what we see in verse 54. The Greek word that is often translated as "enraged" is "διεπρίοντο" which literally carries the idea of something "being sawn in two" – in this case, regarding these men's hearts. You see, the anger and rage of these Jews toward Stephen and his message about Jesus was literally ripping them apart internally.

→ These men's hearts had become so hardened in their unbelief that they were as stiff as dried wood. And the truth of God's Word; when it runs into these kinds of hearts and minds, it can only saw them in two with the sharp teeth of God's irrefutable truth.

✘ But this, of course, is not God's desired effect of His truth. As 1 Timothy 2:4 says, He "desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." And what or who is that truth? In the Gospel Reading today Jesus says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (Jn. 14:6).

→ These men before Stephen wanted to believe their own false truth. And when that runs into Jesus as THE truth, it often boils up into a defensive rage that brings persecution and violence because it sees that it can't have its own way.

✘ We Christians still see this around the world today. I received an email this Friday with very real examples. In India, Hindu extremists attacked a Christian church during worship. They beat and arrested the pastor and took his wife and eight other Christian women into custody. (iCommitToPray.com, 05/01/2026) Why? because those Christians will not give up their faith in Jesus.

→ In Kyrgyzstan a 60-year-old woman is mocked and mistreated by her daughters-in-law because she left Islam. They will not allow her to attend Christian worship or own or read any Christian material, especially a Bible. And in Benin, West Africa a young woman has been rejected by her family who are voodoo practitioners. She has been beaten by her father and kicked out her home because she and others with her have become followers of Christ. (iCommitToPray.com, 05/01/2026)

✘ So, when we, in our faith, run into this kind of unrelenting rage against Jesus, what are we to do? First and foremost we must pray that God will keep us from falling into Satan's deceptive trap to strike out in a sinful fit of rage ourselves. As James 1:20 says, "...the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God." Stephen surely knew Deuteronomy 32:35 and other passages where God clearly says, "Vengeance is Mine."

→ My friends, it is never yours or my place or role, as Christians individuals, to try and get even or to physically be the arm of God's judgement against unbelief or persecution. Yes, He calls us to speak out against false accusations and teachings; against injustice and the actual sin itself as Stephen did. But never ... never are we to rage or physically act out against the person committing that sin.

IV. God's Righteous Anger and Forgiveness

✘ That is only God's place, because only He is perfectly just and righteous, both in His wrath against sin and His forgiveness and grace.

→ Look at how He dealt with the unrelenting rage and disobedience of all mankind. He leveled the fullness of His wrath not against you or me or anyone else except for His one and only Son, there on the cross. Why? because that's where Jesus took on the very essence of every sin and of all sin in our place. In fact, He's the one who hung on the cross and said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Jn. 23:34).

→ And He did that so that, in His grace, He might grant us all the free gift of repentance and forgiveness; so that we might be able, like Stephen, in perfect calm and confidence, to turn the eyes of our faith toward heaven and see "the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right of God" (7:55).

✘ Yes, Stephen, even as stones were flying and crashing against his body, because he knew that it served no good purpose for him to rage against that angry mob – he was blessed to reiterate and proclaim God's love in Jesus one last time when he said, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (7:60). Did that make any difference?

→ Well, we know that, at least for one of those men there that day, the saving power of Jesus broke through the rage and eventually led the "young man named Saul" (7:58), to repent of his sinful rage and embrace God's free gift of faith as the one we call St. Paul.

→ He is the one who wrote in 1 Timothy 1:16, "...I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost (of sinners), Jesus Christ might display His perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in Him for eternal life.

✘ That's you! That's me, because Christ is risen. *He is risen indeed. Alleluia! Amen.*